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Editorial | On Politics

All-mail voting would be good, convenient for Hawaii

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If you will not vote, how about us moving the election? How about if the state moves the election to your house — now will you vote?

Combining the state's new online voter registration plans with renewed interest in vote-by-mail, means you could become a participating member of Hawaii's democracy while sitting comfortably in your PJs, in your own home.

Last week, the clerks from the four counties, plus state election officials, gathered at the state Capitol to again ask legislators for election-year financial help.

Begging for money is not something new for the election branch, but this year, the switch is the emphasis on how the state would save money if elections were conducted by mail.

You can now register to vote online and in 2016 you will be able to walk into an absentee polling place to register and vote. In 2018, all voting centers also will allow same-day registration.

The key to saving money, however, is to do all the voting by mail.

"Over the past several years, it has become increasingly clear that all-mail elections may be the best option for conducting elections in the County of Kauai," said Jade Fountain-Tanigawa, Kauai County clerk, in prepared testimony.

On Maui, with officials worrying about ballots on three islands — Maui, Molokai and Lanai — the process of voting in person is even more complicated and expensive.

"We charter planes to deliver ballots to Molokai, Lanai and Hana the night before each election and to collect the ballots on election night," said Danny Mateo, Maui County clerk.

The fear is that with hurricanes and tropical storms becoming more frequent during the election period, the planes won't fly and the ballots may just not get delivered.

"In an all-mail election, each voter will be mailed a ballot several weeks prior to each election," Mateo said.

While only three states have made the switch to all-mail voting, officials across the country are looking at the system with renewed interest because it is expected to save money.

"Shifting to all-mail elections decreases the need for polling place workers and that can translate into savings. Typically, poll worker wages are a significant part of an election budget," according to a 2014 report from the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Scott Nago, state election chief, added that Hawaii is caught up in the worst parts of several popular systems.

We like voting by mail. In the 2014 general election, more voters voted absentee than in person (180,000 to 189,000), with most doing so by mailing in an absentee ballot. But ballots cannot be counted until Election Day, so there is a time lag in getting out the vote results.

If voting was completely by mail, Nago reasoned, the counting could be done ahead of time so that after the polls close, the results could quickly be announced.

"We would be able to provide more transparent and efficient services," Nago said.

There are few new, big things ahead for next year's Legislature. Moving to all-mail voting makes voting more convenient, less expensive and more secure. It is not really a bold step, but it would be a good step for democracy in Hawaii.

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